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SUBJECT: THE NEW BLE GOUDE

Classified By: POL/ECON SECTION CHIEF SILVIA EIRIZ FOR REASONS 1.4 (B/D
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¶1. (C) Summary. Charles Ble Goude, leader of COJEP (PanAfrican Congress of Young Patriots), is one of three Ivoirians under United Nations (UN) Security Council sanctions. However, an offensive seems to be underway, bolstered by the presidential camp, to re-shape Ble Goude's public image and portray him as a future statesman. Ble Goude's transformation began with his national tour in 2007 to promote reconciliation. He has gained prominence recently by launching a foundation that provides skills training and employment for youth. All indications are that President Gbagbo and some of his closest advisors continue to embrace this divisive and controversial figure. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ble Goude was placed under UN sanctions on February 7, 2006 for repeated public statements advocating violence against UN installations, UN personnel, and foreigners, as well as directing and participating in acts of violence by street militias, including beatings, rapes, and extrajudicial killings. The UN determined that he intimidated the UN, the International Working Group (IWG), the political opposition, and the independent press and sabotaged international radio stations. The UN also found that he was an obstacle to the action of the IWG, the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), the French forces, and the peace process as defined by resolution 1643 of 2005.

¶3. (C) Ble Goude kept a low profile for some time after sanctions were imposed but has, since last year, undertaken actions to transform his public image from leader of an armed militia to statesman. He has been very visible in the media in the last three months in what appears to be a charm offensive to demonstrate to the Ivoirian public that he is a serious political actor. He has conducted press interviews and his second book is scheduled to be released during the month of June. According to the French Embassy, Ble Goude has become a wealthy businessman, with substantial holdings in hotels, nightclubs, restaurants, gas stations, and real estate in Cote d'Ivoire. French Emboff told us that Ble Goude requires payment for all activities he undertakes on behalf of the Presidency and the FPI governing party.

¶4. (U) Ble Goude began his political career in the Student Federation of Cote d'Ivoire (FESCI), rising through the ranks to succeed current Prime Minister Soro as FESCI's Secretary General from 1998 to 2000. In 2001, he founded COJEP (the Pan African Congress of Young Patriots) which he continues to lead. Ble Goude started his public transformation by casting himself as a peacemaker and conciliator when he launched a "peace caravan" in 2007. Over the course of 3 months, he visited 45 towns throughout the country, spreading the theme of reconciliation between rebel and government supporters. Although many observers doubted and continue to doubt his sincerity, Ble Goude evidently delivered a consistent message of peace and reconciliation in his speeches to the youth.

¶5. (U) His newest venture is the launching of a "Forum of

Information and Orientation" that will provide skills training and find jobs for 200 youth. Minister of National Reconciliation Sebastien Dano Djedje, a member of the President's FPI party, delivered a speech at the project's March 14 launching ceremony. According to Ble Goude, 12,000 young people contacted his Forum seeking to be selected. Minister for Planning and Development Paul-Antoine Bohoun Bouabre, also an FPI member, publicly presented Ble Goude with a check for 5 million CFA (USD 12,000) to support this project. Ble Goude's forum was covered on national TV and interviews with him were run several times.

¶6. (U) The June 6 edition of the government's newspaper, "Fraternite Matin," featured an interview with Ble Goude photographed in a suit and tie. Ble Goude said he launched his Forum because as head of a youth movement, he has an obligation to guide the country's youth. He lamented that Cote d'Ivoire's moral fiber has weakened, leading people to seek shortcuts around the law and to take into account only those with financial means. Asked by his interviewer to comment on the arrest of DRC rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bemba, Ble Goude responded that one is never a rebel for life, adding that either one becomes a member of society or ends up like Charles Taylor or Jean-Pierre Bemba or Jonas Savimbi.

¶7. (C) While Ble Goude does not seem to have the following he commanded several years ago, he still has his COJEP faithful that he could mobilize. He also maintains a strong influence over FESCI. Konan Bertin Kouadio, President of the Youth Section of opposition political party PDCI, told Poloffs June 10 that Ble Goude cannot organize the demonstrations and disturbances that he carried out several years ago, but that a large number of youth would still take to the streets if he gave the order. RDR Youth Section head Yayoro Karamokotel told Poloff that Ble Goude is Gbagbo's youth campaign manager. Skepticism about whether Ble Goude is genuinely committed to peaceful political dialogue remains quite high.

¶8. (C) Comment. President Gbagbo has repeatedly asked the UN to lift sanctions against Ble Goude and reportedly remains one of his strongest supporters, along with Simone Gbagbo. The choice of Ble Goude as youth campaign manager is clever because the charismatic Ble Goude can easily motivate and mobilize. It is disturbing, however, that Gbagbo's camp seems to be grooming Ble Goude for future positions in the party and/or the government rather than distancing itself from someone who remains under UN sanctions and who is still a divisive and controversial figure at home. Embassy contacts seem convinced that the government is financing the bulk of Ble Goude's activities, which raises concerns about Gbagbo's genuine commitment to implementation of the Ouagadougou Political Agreement (OPA). The government can finance Ble Goude's jobs for youth initiative, but states it lacks the funds for the civic service program for ex-combatants, which is an integral part of the OPA. It appears that Ble Goude is succeeding in his effort to re-define himself to the Ivorian public, but whether his actions will eventually bear out his new image remains to be seen. End Comment.

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